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ABSTRACT

In a collaborative project between School #74 in Buffalo, New York, and the Graduate School of Education at the State University in Buffalo, predominantly African American sixth graders enhance their writing skills through creative tasks. They also develop their writing voices and gain some exposure to university life. Graduate students in English and social studies, along with two professors, team up with the middle school students and their teachers to explore writing poetry, descriptions, and imagined narratives about college. Each year the students publish an anthology of their writing. The project is thriving, now into its fourth year. (SAM)

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National Council of Teachers of English:

Creative Writing in the Middle Schools

Lisa M. Brooks, Chairperson

November 19,1993

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Good afternoon, I would like to welcome you to "Creative Writing in the Urban Middle School." My name is Lisa Brooks and I am the chairperson of this panel discussion and a graduate student of English Education at the State University of New York at Buffalo. I would like to introduce my panel members: Dr. James Collins, Associate Professor of English Education; Susan Szustak, graduate of English Education; Heidi Torterella, graduate student of English Education; Steve Kutno, graduate student of English Education and Sylvia DuVall is the recorder for this session.

We have decided to divide our time this afternoon four ways, so that I may tell you about the setting for our work, Public School #74 in Buffalo.

For 68 years, School #74 has stood on the eastside of Buffalo, New York. The eastside is predominately African American and is noted for the most crime, homicides and drug-related problems in the Buffalo area. It is also the "side of town" that gets over looked for its positive aspects as well. The Masten and Hamlin Park districts which surround School #74 are like most neighborhood communities there are: schools, a library, churches, neighborhood crime watches, a Boys Club, after school tutoring and recreational programs and privately owned businesses.

Some of the streets that surround School #74 such as : Northland Avenue, Donaldson Road and Wholers Avenue, represent many African American homes which have different incomes, professions, and age groups. Out of these homes School #74 has contributed to the careers of doctors, lawyers, professors, business

entrepreneurs, and the Vice President of our university.

School #74 which sits on the edge of these two communities has sustained itself through depressions, recessions, different educational "eras," educational theories, students, teachers, and principals.

This brown brick building with its rusted wire fence has welcomed many students every September from the Masten and Hamlin Park communities. Its graffiti that is "in living color" makes itself visible on all sides of the building. The wire grids framed by wooden boards on the first floor windows that prevent break-ins, also shut out the view from the outside.

The playground which is also the parking lot, has basket hoops, but no nets. It also has a rusted swing set, but no swings.

Inside School #74, one can hear the echoes of children reciting the alphabet, a teacher scolding a student, students laughing, bellowing, ribb'n, dis'n each other in the hallways. As the sounds echo through the air, they also bounce off the bare walls with chipped white paint, the hanging plaster from the ceiling and that visible uncovered pipe which travels behind a student's desk in many rooms. Starting at 11:30 am, a brown box with lunches inside is placed outside of every classroom in the building. Students have to eat in their classrooms because School #74 has no cafeteria.

As I walked through the halls of School #74, some questions were generated,"What a difference a simple coat of paint could paint on these walls?" "Where are the pictures of children on the walls?" "Why are the doors locked with chains from the inside?"

Many of the Pre-K classrooms are very small, cluttered and not carpeted, which makes it very difficult for thirty young people to maneuver and do activities.

In some of the upper level classrooms, the walls are bare;leaving no traces of students' accomplishments or work. In Every classroom, textbooks are lined up neatly on bookshelves because students can not take their books home. In two of the junior high classrooms, more than one subject is taught. For instance, room 215 is not only where Social Studies is held, but Science too. On one wall there is a torn "Periodic Table," and another wall has pictures of significant people in history.

The teachers at School #74 are predominately African American females. There is only one male teacher. As is true of most schools, School #74 has a variety of teachers, from the teacher who never leaves his/her desk to the teacher who is constantly "energized" in the classroom.

Our mission at School #74 was to help 6th graders to enhance their writing skills through creative tasks, to develop their "voices," and to expose them to university life. This collaborative project between School #74 and the Graduate School of Education has been thriving for four years. During this time, graduate teams of English and Social Studies along with two professors, Dr.James Collins and Dr. Susan Noffke also from the Graduate School of Education worked with two 6th grade classes.

Every other Thursday from November to March, the group would arrive at Hamlin Park School #74 at 8:30 am to prepare and discuss the activities for that day. We would spend approximately 45

minutes with each class. On the alternating Thursdays, the 50 students would travel to University at Buffalo. At this time, the students' activities would be joined first with a reading selection from a university administrator and highlighted with lunch.

The writing component focused on the "partnership" approach, a collaboration between teachers and students which included modeling and co-authoring. Each year, the writing experiences culminate[3] in the publication of an anthology of all the students' writing (we've brought samples of the book). Four to five students worked with each graduate student on poetry selections, writing responses to short stories and authoring their own personal narratives.

Now that you have the background on the students, the building, and the area around School #74, my panel members will go into detail about, Using Poetry to Teach Writing; Writing Descriptions to Appreciate Human Diversity; and Writing Imagined Narratives to Think About College.